

Questions for Sandor Goodhart – Professor of English and author of

***Reading Stephen Sondheim: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: Garland, 2000)**

**Please note that for the purpose of this research paper, the term commercial is being defined as “having profit rather than artistic or other value as a primary aim”*

1. How important do you think commercial viability is to a musical?

I think it's very important and I think that Sondheim thinks it's very important. I think that's the subject matter of the song "Putting It Together" in the second act of *Sunday in the Park with George*. I think artists would like to think that they don't depend upon what critics or donors say but they really do. There's a very famous instance of this kind of thinking that occurs in 1957 when Albert Camus gives a speech in Sweden (on the occasion of his reception of the Nobel Prize) and he says that every artist begins by thinking that they're different and special, and their sensibility is unique; but they learn very quickly, if they're worth their weight as artists, that their talent is only viable if it acknowledges its identity to the people from whom they feel themselves to be separate ("often he who has chosen the fate of the artist because he felt himself to be different soon realizes that he can maintain neither his art nor his difference unless he admits that he is like the others"). Artists have to own their own membership at some point in the very community about which they are speaking and that acknowledgement allows them to speak. I think that's a very important lesson, one that Sondheim certainly has articulated in a musical like *Sunday in the Park with George*. All my experiences with him personally (in the course of writing my book) and all the accounts I have read about his work suggest that he is open to hearing what other people think, that he is inordinately generous and willing to engage people and wants his writing to be as viable as possible while at the same time doing his own projects.

2. What elements do you think make a musical commercially viable?

Well, I think the most famous criterion from Sondheim's point of view is its "sing-ability", the ability of an audience to sing his songs. Sondheim often points out that in *A Little Night Music*, the fact that the line "a weekend in the country" is repeated so many times gives us the illusion that that song is more accessible than others. I think, in general, it depends on the audience. If you look that the things that are fads in American culture, for example, on television, you go through periods of time in which there are a great many reality TV shows, or law and order cop shows. Viability is really a question of audience, I think. In the American popular theatre, viability, in some sense, has to do with a happy ending and that's why I wrote that opening essay for the book *Reading Stephen Sondheim*. I think that what Sondheim is doing is challenging the foundations of viability, even though he wants viability. He's saying that the happy ending that we've inherited from the musicals of Rogers and Hammerstein is unreal, that it's a fairytale ending, and that we have to think more maturely about our relationships, and adopt more adult approaches to our relationships. It's a complicated issue, because on the one hand, he wants viability and viability in American musical theatre depends upon everything working out. But his goal is to show that not everything works out. The things that work out in Act One do not necessarily work out in Act Two. *Into the Woods* is precisely about that issue. You have all the problems solved at the end of Act One, and it seems like a perfect act. I remember the first time I saw that musical. I wondered what he was going to do with Act Two. We know many writers as well as novelists find Act Two difficult to write. For example, J.D. Salinger wrote a really extraordinary book, *A Catcher in the Rye*, and then was never able to duplicate that gesture. There are countless numbers of writers in America who find that second act to be a problem. The theatre in which Sondheim works is no different. How do you do a second act? The second act is never easy. I think a good example of that problem, is also reflected in *Sunday in the Park*, to which

we referred earlier. Sondheim and Lapine tried to do something experimental to solve the problem. Act Two takes place a hundred years later when virtually everyone from Act One is dead, apart from the artist's daughter, Marie, of course, who is now the grandmother of the new experimental artist. Also, in *Into the Woods*. Sondheim has his characters engage in some really forthright discussions about dealing with the realities that are set up in the fairytale endings of Act One. I think all his work is about that subsequent reflection. In other words, to come back to your question, it's a complicated issue. I think viability in the theatre is all about happy endings but Sondheim's theme is the undoing of happy endings. So how do you maintain viability and maintain the undoing of happy endings? That, I think, is one of the central tensions in Sondheim's work.

3. In your opinion, who is the most commercially viable musical theatre composer and why?

I think if you look at the popular musical theatre in America, you have plays like *Wicked*, whose composer and lyricist is Stephen Schwartz, or *The Phantom of the Opera*, whose music was written by Andrew Lloyd Webber and whose lyrics were written by Charles Hart and Richard Stilgoe (apparently Alan Jay Lerner contributed to one of the songs). I've met Stephen Schwartz and he certainly admits that he learned a lot from Sondheim and his musical has been running for quite a while. I don't know any Sondheim musical that has run nearly as long as *Wicked* has been running. At the same time, if you look at *Wicked*, it's an enjoyable show (and I've seen it several times with a group I'm involved with, one of whose members, Suzanne Ross, wrote a book about the play that I like). But I think Stephen Schwartz is not engaging things on a personal relationship basis the way that Sondheim is. I think he's dealing with issues of scapegoating and exclusionary behaviour, all of which is, I think, extremely important. But I think Sondheim's substance is really relationships. I'm not sure that in the popular media audiences find it either easy or desirable to deal with relationships, but that is, nonetheless, what Sondheim wants to deal with. He wants to deal with people's relationships with each other: a father's relationship with his son, a mother's relationship with her son. But that concern goes against grain of the commercial viability of his work. If you were to compare and contrast the ticket sales of *Wicked* with sales from the production of a show such as *Merrily We Roll Along* (which is reputed to have closed after sixteen performances, although some dispute that claim), you get a stark example of what I am talking about. *Merrily* is not very much performed today (in comparison with other Sondheim plays) although I think it is an extraordinary play and an extraordinary score.

4. What, if anything, distinguishes Sondheim from other musical theatre composers?

I think the difference is clearly the issue of maturity. When you ask that question I almost instantly think of the second act of *Into the Woods*. Take, for example, the song "No More" in Act Two. The father sings: "Running away, we'll do it. / Why sit around, resigned? / Trouble is, son, the farther you run, / The more you'll feel undefined. / For what you have left undone, and more, / What you've left behind." You could spend a lot of money in psychoanalysis to come to that realization. And then the duet in which the song ends reinforces that idea: (the Father): We disappoint, we leave a mess, / we die, but we don't. (the Son): We disappoint in turn, I guess. / Forget, though, we won't. / (Both): Like father, like son. The last line, "like father, like son," sung together by father and son, is in my view a brilliant moment in the play. In other words, you try to run away from something, and then it turns out you've created the very thing that you tried to run away from by running away. It's a discovery that Oedipus makes; he tries to avoid fulfilling the oracle in Sophocles' ancient Greek play and it turns out that the very attempts to avoid fulfilling the oracle are precisely what allow him to fulfil it. Sondheim has discovered the heart of the difficulty of human relations. We start out with good intentions, but it's not the bad intentions that undo us, it's the good intentions themselves that lead us into the difficulty we're trying to

escape. I think that there is the kernel of what Sondheim is doing. He's exploring relationships in a way that is psychologically sophisticated, that is theatrically sophisticated, and I think that to some extent other writers are willing to sacrifice that sophistication (about which they clearly know a great deal) in order to avoid ruffling the feathers of the audience before whom they are performing. So an audience can say after a play by other writers, 'okay, we're happy now. We can go home now that we have obtained the happy ending we wanted'. I mean Sondheim allows you that joy in a way as well. I was just looking at some YouTube accounts of songs from *Sunday in the Park* and I realized that there is great joy in Sondheim's work. What could be more glorious than the Finale of *Sunday in the Park*? You have the singing of the song and it's a full and positive experience. So it's not true that Sondheim leaves you only unhappy; that's not true at all, he leaves you with a sense of that I find is more comprehensive and more cosmic. Other writers leave you tickled and amused and entertained but not necessarily profoundly moved. I find myself always profoundly moved when I watch or listen to a Sondheim work.

5. What type of audience do you think Sondheim attracts and why?

I think he attracts an older audience. Wasn't it actress Lee Remick who first said Sondheim writes for adults? I think he writes for people who are, in some sense, past their prime and can theatricalise themselves as figments of their own memory. I think in some sense, the quintessential musical in that regard is *Follies*. In *Follies*, actors and actresses who have been a part of the theatre come to a reunion party on the occasion of the building's demise and suddenly their memories begin to take over. Their memories lead them to re-enact the dramas that were once so important for them and that have played such an instrumental part in their lives. Ben and Sally begin thinking about what it used to be like and wonder whether they can recapture that past. For a brief moment or two they decide that they are going to leave their respective spouses and run off together. As soon as they do come to that decision, of course, the plan fails and they begin to realise what they've thought of as real, and what they've structured their lives around, may be in fact itself little more than a theatricalization. They wonder whether the theatricalization is what's real, or whether it is the dream that is real. And that questioning leads them into an isolation which we could describe as a kind of madness. Each character in the 'Loveland' sequence has their own kind of collapse and the most spectacular of these is perhaps that of Ben who loses his lines in the middle of the last chorus of his signature song and simply begins to scream. Once the characters go mad, you have some difficulty representing that on the stage since madness is the inability to stop. Madness is a kind of obsessive behaviour. The song reaches a cacophonous level in which Ben is hearing everything that has happened in his life (at least in so far as we have witnessed bits and pieces of that past in this play). And then suddenly the action on the stage stops and he's simply taken home by his wife. In other words, I think the best audiences for Sondheim's plays are audiences that are knowledgeable about the popular theatre in America and about theatre history, but also about aging. For example, in the case of *Follies*, I think the best audience is one that has an appreciation for what the Tin Pan Alley writers tried to do, what Rogers and Hammerstein and all the writers of American musical comedies of the forties and fifties tried to do, and are only a little bit passed that moment in their own tastes and perhaps in their own life experiences. So I think he's writing for people who are probably forty and up who have had some of the experiences that he has had and want to reflect upon that experience.

6. Why do you think there are currently no Sondheim shows playing on Broadway and the West End?

That's the one question that I don't have much of an answer to. I don't know enough about the specific dynamics of commercial productions of Sondheim's plays in this country and

elsewhere—what makes a production of Sondheim financially viable at one moment and not at another. There are moments when I look in the *New York Times* and see there are three or four of his plays on the stage so maybe we're just in a moment where there's nothing going in (both here and in England), but maybe tomorrow there will be three or four more of his plays running again. In other words, I don't think it's significant. I think it's accidental that at one moment there are no plays because I think in the next moment we'll put on more Sondheim. Sondheim is not finished, Sondheim is not gone, not by a long shot. You ask in one of your later questions whether Sondheim will continue and I think he's only going to get stronger as time goes on. His last TV production attracted more interest than I ever expected it would attract. I thought the same people would watch it and talk about it, but in fact all kinds of people were saying that they saw the Sondheim extravaganza on TV. So I think Sondheim's reputation is just getting bigger and better and if for one moment Sondheim has disappeared, then at the next moment his work will reappear in duplicate or triplicate versions. So I wouldn't worry about that fact.

7. How do you think society's views on Sondheim's work have changed/developed since his original productions (if at all)?

I think overall he has been fairly experimental. If you think back to what he started with, he was working within the framework of others. One of his earliest works was *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, which was a showcase for many of Broadway's standard comedians (you remember that Zero Mostel and Jack Gilford played in the original production—which, so the story goes, had also been offered to Phil Silvers and Milton Berle). Later *Anyone Can Whistle* came along, which was already an experimental play). But Sondheim was already working with Leonard Bernstein in *West Side Story* and he was working with Julie Styne's music in *Gypsy*. Then he started to become a little more experimental. *Company* is produced. But what is he experimental about in *Company*? Marriage and happy endings. So that he's still operating within a certain familiar framework; he's doing things just slightly differently. And then *Follies* comes along which I think was a genuine break from the idea of a happy ending—which even the conclusion *Company* had kept open. Then *A Little Night Music* is produced which relies upon standard comic structuring although the insights about romance and aging are as searing as any he would write later, and *Sweeney Todd*, a musical about murder and cannibalism. Then *Pacific Overtures* which is doing something non-Western and episodic (the plot almost disappears entirely). And then *Sunday in the Park with George* is produced which was a musical play about a painting, which is an extraordinary idea. And if we wondered what he could possibly do after that, it was not long after that he did *Merrily* which was a reproduction of a play from the 1930's (by Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman) and is a play in which, instead of going forwards in time, you go backwards! Clearly, at this point, he's becoming openly experimental. Then after that he tries to work on fairytales (in *Into the Woods*) and he tries to redo a film by the Italian filmmaker, Ettore Scola (*Passione d'Amore*—a film based in its own turn upon Iginio Ugo Tarchetti's novel *Fosca*) upon which his play *Passion* is based. Subsequently, he writes a musical about presidential assassinations which I thought was another incredible idea. How do you turn some of the most traumatic moments in a nation's history into a stage musical without lapsing into parody? Then finally *Bounce* comes along. I think that in many ways *Bounce* is the most unique of Sondheim's scores since I think in some ways *Bounce* is about his own musical writing, a reflection on his own musical styles. So many of his own musical styles are at work in it (and in the revised version that adopted the title of *Road Show*) that I wonder what Sondheim can write after that. In other words, Sondheim is always trying something new. He begins within a familiar framework, more or less the framework of others. He works with Richard Rogers in one play, and Leonard Bernstein in another, and with Ethel Merman and Julie Styne, both established

professionals, in a third. Then he begins to find other collaborators with whom he has more or less equal status—Hal Prince, for example. But then in the projects on which he works in the eighties and on, he clearly becomes the primary figure. Although James Lapine and John Weidman have strong reputations of their own, the projects in which they work with Sondheim clearly known as Sondheim projects. So I think the overall answer to your question is that he moves from the more or less standard and expected to experimental and unfamiliar and that's really how he changes.

8. Do you think there is any way to make Sondheim's work more accessible to today's audience?

I think that we need to teach it. I think there should be courses on Sondheim in the university. I've thought about that a lot, actually, I think there need to be people who not only write books on Sondheim (I think there are out there already a number of books on Sondheim and certainly, with the internet and DVD's available, a number of his plays are available in DVD form) but as well I think we need to teach Sondheim in universities. I think we need to not just have summer courses, but courses on Sondheim's work need to be part of a regular curricular programme. In my opinion, that is the way to make Sondheim's work more available, by teaching a generation of students how to look at the work. It's not enough to keep putting on productions because we have a certain way of going to the productions, saying nice things about it, and then going out for food and going home and going to sleep. I think we need people to learn not just how to produce Sondheim or how to think back positively about the evening's experience in the theatre but also how to talk about Sondheim, and I think we get that done in the classroom. It's similar to the way how Shakespeare gets to be known; it's not just by attending his plays, but by learning Shakespeare in the classroom, by taking courses on his work at the university. I think there should be courses on Sondheim at universities the way there are on other great dramatic artists.

9. In your essay "The End of Ever After" you mention that you think Sondheim may have 'found a hearing' if he had used a different medium such as film or non-musical drama. How do you think this would have affected how his work was perceived by audience and critics?

You are referring to page 7 where I say if he worked in some other medium such as film like Woody Allen or non-musical forms like Arthur Miller then we might respond to his work differently. But the fact is that he didn't and I think he would probably be entirely different if he did. We wouldn't be having this conversation, for one thing, and we wouldn't have been writing books on his work. I think Sondheim is quintessentially theatrical and needs to work in the theatre. When he tries to work on other things in other media, he's not as successful. He co-wrote the screenplay for *The Last of Sheila* and the play *Getting Away with Murder* but neither of those projects have been thought to be as successful as his musical ventures. What we do remember him for is what he writes in these crossword-puzzle-like passages in his songs. I think Sondheim is quintessentially theatrical and what he's theatricalising is popular theatre itself. So it's hard to imagine him in any other form. Therefore, I can't really answer your question. He might have found a hearing but it wouldn't be Sondheim. Sondheim is someone who works in popular theatre and tries to make it serious. He tries to use popular theatre as his venue for thinking about adulthood and maturity and about relationships.

10. How do you think Tim Burton's film of 'Sweeney Todd' in 2007 affected people's knowledge of Sondheim's work, if at all?

I think it made them less scared of him. I think the film was not a bad film. I was disappointed that so many of the songs that are so important to the musical were excised. I understood why they did it, and it would have been a very, very long movie if they kept in all the songs. But it would have been nice to have had a movie version of it. I think the movie finally came off the way other Tim Burton films come off, which is to say, like a cartoon, and I thought that was unfortunate. I think that the play is one of the finest that Sondheim has done. All the plays are wonderful, but I particularly like *Sweeney Todd* and I was really anticipating an extraordinary production and the result is a kind of a cartoon with real actors. I happened to go to the movie with an individual who said that if it was about blood and gore she would leave. I think the reason that she was able to stay through it was because it was cartoon-like. I think that it suggested to people that Sondheim is not fearful and that's a positive result, but I don't think it really got at what Sondheim is trying to get us to think about. Perhaps there is more to be done on *Sweeney Todd*. I love the George Hearn production and I believe there is a DVD of that production with Angela Lansbury. Having Helen Bonham-Carter in the film really made a different presentation of the female lead Mrs. Lovett. It was a different play. I can't exactly say I was disappointed, they already said in advance that they wouldn't have all the songs and Sondheim agreed to that, so it was a different project from the theatre. If you compared it to the theatre production, I would say the movie was a taste of Sondheim, but it was not really what Sondheim is about, which is an in-depth probing at the most adult levels possible of relationship and this production was more of a cartoon.

11. On that note, what influence do you think the celebrity casting had on the popularity of the film?

I think it had a lot of influence. I think people like Helen Bonham-Carter; she's been in so many movies at this point; she was in the Merchant Ivory productions, and she's worked with Kenneth Branagh and Woody Allen. Also, Johnny Depp is an amazingly popular actor and I think he's a good actor and he does interesting things. I think Johnny Depp's character, in the *Pirates* sequences, for example, is interesting. He has almost single-handedly brought the *Pirates of the Caribbean* sequence to life, in my opinion. But there again, his character in those films is a kind of cartoon character, and I think he leant his characterizations a cartoonish quality when he did Todd. I'm not saying that Johnny Depp could not have done a more George Hearn-like *Sweeney Todd* if Tim Burton had wanted to do that in the film. But I think it is hard to deny that the characters that Johnny Depp has been playing recently carried over into his version of Todd, although it is hard to say whether that was Johnny Depp's idea or Tim Burton's. In a certain way, in other words, I think that celebrity worked somewhat against the film because you had characters that had certain ways of doing things and you expected them to do those things and you brought that into the theatre as your expectations rather than allowing the Sondheim work to develop your expectations for you. No doubt, in saying that, I am emphasizing my own set of expectations (deriving from George Hearn and Angela Lansbury) and Sondheim of anyone on the current theatre scene wants us to play against the grain of our expectations. He himself certainly does, for example, when he takes a song that was developed for one context in one of his musicals and then allows it to be used for an entirely different context in one of the several reviews of his work that have been produced (think of the musical revue *Putting It Together*, for example). And so I guess the real concern is whether the expectations either we who are critical readers of Sondheim or popular film audiences that have seen *Pirates of the Caribbean* find their expectations endorsed or challenged in interesting ways. I am not sure that the cartoonish characterizations from other productions are challenged in Tim Burton's production, which is somewhat ironic since *Sweeney Todd* comes from the *Grand Guignol* puppet plays of the end of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century in France against

which it is constantly playing. Tim Burton's production reintroduces precisely the kind of cartoonish quality Sondheim's play was working against.

12. What do you think the future trends of musical theatre will be?

These things are very hard to predict. I would certainly hope the importance of Sondheim's work continues to be recognized. I think Sondheim is not dead yet and he's still going, he's still commenting upon and being actively involved with his own productions, although it's not clear whether he's going to write another major musical. But I think what is clear is that he's going to be one of the cornerstones for the future of musical comedy and musical theatre in America. I think we're going to remember him the way we do Eugene O'Neil or Arthur Miller. His work is going to be a milestone of the serious treatment of popular theatre. Rogers and Hammerstein were clearly one milestone, and I think he's going to be another, in the first place because his work is so deeply indebted to theirs for his subject matter, but also he's developing a criticism that was never overt in Rogers and Hammerstein. Rogers and Hammerstein weren't insensitive of course to the statements their work was making. They also had the beginnings of a certain distancing of themselves from their subject matter. But they didn't develop that particular critical perspective. Their goal was to develop the musical away from the *skits* that had formed the foundations for the musicals before them and their major innovation was developing songs having to do with advancing the plot. Sondheim has gone on from that point and has not only developed plot with the songs but he has utilised songs in his questioning of the plot and making the plot a questioning of myths, of popular cultural myths. I think Sondheim's work is going to be regarded in the future as a major step in musical theatre thinking. I don't think anyone equals him or will for quite a while. I don't think he has a rival for the power of his critical thinking about the materials with which he works. I think he will be the standard against which other, later writers of musical comedy and musical theatre more generally will measure their work.